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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

VOLUME XXXIV

AUGUST, 1909

NUMBER 2

Editorial

JESUS AND HISTORICAL INQUIRY

It is now generally conceded that Jesus, as the most prominent figure in the history of Christianity, should be studied by the historical method of investigation. Historical inquiry has amply justified itself as a method of scientific research and its broader conclusions are admitted to be valid and valuable. But when it is applied more in detail to specific topics its propriety and worth are sometimes doubted or even openly questioned.

LIMITATIONS OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Historical research certainly has its limitations, even in a study of Jesus. To claim that it alone can supply the ultimate certainties of religion would be absurd, for many persons have been truly religious, as that term is popularly and quite properly understood, though they have known nothing of this discipline. Nor is it possible for the great mass of Christians to become experts in this critical work, and if they could it would not especially equip them to meet many of the practical religious demands of the present age. It may be said that to know what Jesus said or did on some obscure occasion is of minor importance compared with an appreciation of his spirit as that spirit is clearly portrayed in the gospels. Again, it is claimed, reliable data for solving many of these questions are so scanty that the results reached must necessarily be hypothetical, a fact which seems to be proved by the mutually contradictory conclusions to which different investigators have sometimes come. Whether minute historical research is capable of performing any further important service for modern Christianity is therefore often gravely doubted, nor is such doubt wholly without foundation.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECTING HISTORICAL STUDY

On the other hand, unfortunate results often follow a neglect of historical studies. There is a prevailing tendency to impute to Jesus one's own subjective ideas, consequently he has been made to play all sorts of rôles. The skeptically inclined have decided that he was not a historical personage but was a mythical creation of primitive religious fancy; or, if he lived at all, comparatively nothing about him can now be known with certainty. Others doubt his Semitic ancestry and find him to have been descended from Aryan stock; he is for others an exponent of Buddhistic doctrine, teaching a self-redemption to be attained by a complete suppression of all desire; others see in him an ideal teacher of pantheism whose God was the universe and nothing more. By some he is leveled down to the position of an Old Testament sage, a plain preacher of righteousness, who after his death was exalted to a position of distinction through the messianic faith of his followers; others have represented him as a neurotic visionary who appropriated to himself current Jewish messianic ideas and faced death in the confidence that he would soon return upon the clouds to vindicate his supernatural claims; by others he is pictured as the ideal social reformer and teacher of genuine anarchistic principles; or again he is found to be a typical ethical theorist and not at all a religious enthusiast; while yet others think him an ideal modern theologian who took special pains in his teaching to furnish future generations with a set of proof-texts to substantiate rigid systems of doctrine. In view of this situation the need of a discriminating, objective historical research cannot fail to be apparent. One may readily sympathize with a well-known modern writer who warmly censures the twentieth century for its arrogance in assuming that "we must wean ourselves from a contemptible dependence upon history in matters of religion."

THE FUNCTION OF HISTORY

It may be very true, as is sometimes urged, that the essential thing in religion is a spiritually enlightened religious consciousness in the individual (as is seen, for example, in Jesus), and it might be theoretically conceivable that such a consciousness should be possessed by one today who knew relatively little about the historical Jesus—one

who was indeed ignorant that such a person ever lived; yet the actual situation in which we find ourselves seems to throw the emphasis farther back. Those who exemplify Jesus' spirit best are seemingly those who have meditated much upon the story of him and his work as that story has been handed down, though somewhat imperfectly, to be sure, by history. The contemplation of the objective, notwithstanding the serious perversion to which it is ever liable, has been and not improbably will continue to be an important means of stimulating and cultivating religious life. Some masterful spirits may be able to reach the heights of religious attainment otherwise, but the majority seem destined to climb by a laborious path. They need to lean hard upon the past for encouragement and support; and not infrequently too they, with their narrower vision, will regard those who have come up some other way as "thieves and robbers." This is life as we find it, though not perhaps as we could wish it to be. In this situation it is not a question of dispensing with history but of enlightening its pages and making it furnish the utmost possible aid.

It should not be imagined that an accurate acquaintance with history is of itself a guarantee of piety, nor that the discovery of the actual historical Jesus will supply a ready-made and normative christological dogma. Primarily piety is a personal attainment in Christian living, and Christology is a speculative interpretation of Jesus' worth for the individual interpreter; but history may be, and as a matter of actual experience is, largely contributory to each of these things. It furnishes, perhaps incidentally, much practical stimulus and help. It frees one from erroneous ideas and so restrains the activity of subjectivism; it broadens one's outlook upon the movements of Jesus' time and so gives a more intelligent and sympathetic appreciation of him and his work. Contemplation of his pious life, and a keener sense of the secret of his personality, stimulate one in the attainment of piety today and make possible a new evaluation of Jesus' personal significance for the believer. Also there are many Christians with whom the intellectual aspects of life hold an important place, and they are particularly desirous that their ideas of Jesus shall be compatible with historic fact. Under these circumstances historical inquiry has both an educative and an inspirational function.

THE POSSIBILITY OF RESULTS

But, it may be urged, all this might be worth while if historical inquiry could do any more for us than it has already done—if it had not already exhausted its possibilities. But who can know that it has? There are surely problems enough still demanding investigation, and only time can disclose what careful critical research may accomplish. In the case of Jesus, for instance, it is at present keenly debated whether or not his religious consciousness was dominated by apocalyptic ideas. Historical study would be guilty of unpardonable negligence did it not bend its energies to the faithful examination of this question. Many other problems of similar significance also invite the historian's attention, and he may not neglect even the minutest items if by their study he can contribute enlightenment and helpfulness to the cause of modern Christianity. Of course he does not claim that all religion must wait upon the results of his research—he would not lord it over any man's faith but he would be a helper of every man's joy.